



Crop subsidies switched to feeding needy as food prices rise

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— Most people call it a farm bill. But it's really more of a food bill.

That's even more true this year as negotiators, spurred by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other urban lawmakers, move dollars from crop subsidies to food stamps and other programs for feeding the needy.

Suddenly, higher food prices for consumers are a more urgent political issue as the November election approaches than government payments to farmers who are doing pretty well on their own now.

Around two-thirds of an almost \$300 billion, five-year bill moving through Congress is devoted to nutrition programs, most of which goes to food stamps for the poor. That compares with 55 percent six years ago when Congress last set the nation's agriculture priorities.

"We have the potential of seeing an epidemic level of hunger in America if we do not get a farm bill," said Maura Daly, a lobbyist for America's Second Harvest — The Nation's Food Bank Network, a domestic hunger-relief organization based in Chicago.

Daly said rising food and energy costs plus record home foreclosures have created a "perfect storm" for needy families. She says food banks are seeing around a 20 percent increase in the number of people turning to them for help.

The extra assistance for food and nutrition programs has brought House members representing urban areas aboard a bill that also features a continuation of generous farm subsidies. President Bush says any subsidies for growers with incomes above \$200,000 is too generous.

That urban-rural dynamic has been particularly helpful to farm states this year, as crop prices are higher than ever and farm country is booming, while low-income families struggle with higher grocery bills.

Pelosi and other Democratic leaders let farm-state lawmakers write a bill that includes expanded subsidies for many crops and continued government payments to wealthy farmers. But they have gathered support for the legislation with increases for food stamps and other nutrition programs that total more than \$10 billion over the next 10 years.

"I think the issue of food costs rising has really heightened the interest in the nutrition program," said Mary Kay Thatcher, an American Farm Bureau Federation lobbyist who has worked on many farm bills. "Every ten years when the census occurs and there are fewer people who do agriculture, we have to broaden our net."

Bruce Babcock, director of the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development at Iowa State University, says food stamp programs have increasingly driven farm bills as the farm population shrinks and their representatives in Congress "needed a log-rolling vehicle to buy votes."

"It has been a gradual change," he said.

Nutrition programs also help farmers in the end, Babcock said, because they enable people to buy more food. Some farm-state lawmakers have grumbled that the net has become too broad.

"This is further evidence of movement in a direction that is less friendly to farmers in Kansas and the small towns they live in," Rep. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., said after negotiators switched an additional \$650 million from farm to food subsidies last Friday.

But the extra money helped to win over Pelosi and House Ways and Means Chairman Charlie Rangel, a Democrat who represents parts of New York City. Rangel was in charge of finding extra money for the bill, and both had balked at Senate programs that would give more money to farmers.

"The Speaker got a huge win out of this," said House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson, D-Minn., after lawmakers agreed on the added nutrition dollars.

Bush, however, is still threatening a veto, but not specifically over the additional food aid. The president

complained Tuesday that the legislation is still bloated with government crop supports.

“It’s not the time to ask American families who are already paying more in the checkout line to pay more in subsidies for wealthy farmers,” Bush said.

Negotiators were still taking a chisel Thursday to some of those subsidies, but were still far from Bush’s target.

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